

Small towns provide rich inspiration, says One Book One Aurora author



By Brock Weir

Brian Francis is a naturally funny guy and humour is something he always wanted to impart in his books, but when he found the short stories of Nobel laureate Alice Munro, something deeper clicked.

Munro's stories of small-town southwestern Ontario, and the colourful people that made up their respective communities, struck a chord with the Sarnia native.

"The fact she was writing about these interesting people in these small communities, places that might not seem exciting to the big city people, or whatever, she is representing those lives – and they were interesting lives," says Mr. Francis, whose second novel, *Natural Order*, was recently selected by the Aurora Public Library to be the centrepiece of its 2017 One Book One Aurora campaign. "It showed me that I could pursue that. It validated that whole genre of writing about small towns and there is always rich material. Stories don't have to happen in the 1700s, or be in Paris, or wherever it might be.

"Sometimes as a writer, you can feel self-conscious that your stomping grounds can be kind of small and that works against you sometimes, but Munro's writing shows there is no shortage of material depending on how small your home territory is. There are stories that are just as interesting as anywhere else."

Mr. Francis, as well as the Aurora Public Library are just as intrigued to see what stories and dialogue come out of a medium-sized community like Aurora as they use *Natural Order* as a springboard for a year-long dialogue on the themes it contains.

As *The Auroran* reported last week, *Natural Order* follows the story of Joyce, a woman nearing the end of her life in a nursing home, trying to make peace with herself over a decision she made regarding her gay son. *Natural Order* follows Joyce at various points in her life and the path that led her to make such a pivotal, regrettable decision.

"For me, *Natural Order* was about looking back and reconciling yourself," says Mr. Francis. "I think all of us feel that sometimes we're making a decision that is right for us at the time. We make decisions at points in our life and history show us that sometimes those decisions weren't the best ones. How do you reconcile yourself with those choices that you make when you thought you knew better, but time reveals you didn't make the right decision? That is one of the universal ideas of the book: how do you reconcile with who you used to be, or your past, if the person you need forgiveness from is no longer there?"

These are some of the very themes the Aurora Public Library (APL), in association with numerous community groups ranging from the Aurora Cultural Centre to the local chapter of Amnesty International, hope to explore during One Book One Aurora, which aims to get all of Aurora reading from *Natural Order* through book clubs and free, fully-stocked lending libraries that are set to pop up around the community beginning this spring.

"Our expectation and hope is there will be enough groups in the community who will want to do their own programming," says APL's Reccia Mandelcorn, who says members of the Aurora Cultural Roundtable are already brainstorming ideas, along with groups like the Aurora Camera Club. "What we do say is, okay, read this book, think about how your organization can support it, and then it really becomes a community conversation as opposed to Library programming, and that is what drives this project – and that is what I think the Library is about."

Helping kickstart that community conversation will be a series of roundtable discussions for members of the local LGBTQ community on how the APL can best meet their needs. The first one, tailored to LGBTQ youth, will take place Wednesday, February 15, from 7 ? 8.30 p.m. in the Library's Magna Room. A similar event for LGBTQ adults will take place Wednesday, March 15, in the same time and location.

Mr. Francis is no stranger to his works opening up a dialogue for LGBTQ youth. His first novel, *Fruit*, follows Peter, an overweight pre-teen struggling with finding the language to express his own sexuality.

?It was capturing a point in my life where I didn't have the language to describe my difference, but I always felt I was different and things weren't fitting together in any real, sensible way,? Mr. Francis recalls.? I know something was at work, but I couldn't quite figure it out. I am trying to capture that because I hadn't read [that kind of] story before. It was also about body image and boys. I had never read a book that dealt with body image and boys. So much of young adult fiction seemed to have female protagonists dealing with sexuality or dealing with body issues and self-esteem. I wanted to explore that.?

It was a bold book. Peter, after all, has to deal with a set of talking nipples. Needless to say, it is not a situation very many overweight pre-teen boys struggling with their sexuality have to deal with, but Mr. Francis says it was used to show Peter in conflict with his body.

Soon after it was published, Mr. Francis says he was ?mortified? when his hairdresser gave the book to her own child, then in Grade 7. He didn't intend to write a book for the young adult market, but he realised young people would come to identify with the story.

This was only heightened five years later when *Fruit* was selected as one of the books in Canada Reads 2009.

It helped him reach a much wider audience and the publication of *Natural Order* has only furthered that progression.

?I think *Natural Order* was more satisfying from a creative standpoint because it was more built from scratch. It wasn't that *Fruit* was easy to write, but it was pulling more from my own experience, whereas *Natural Order* felt more rewarding because I was creating Joyce, a character I was not in synch with in any strong way.

?It was challenging for me to create the character knowing she wouldn't have been too responsive or responding to me at certain points in her life, but to create a character that was empathetic at the same time that I could feel for her and understand her, not that she was the enemy but she would have tried to hold me back as opposed to setting me free and I needed to come to terms with that character in my head.

?Success as a writer is pushing yourself into new areas. For me, success is whether I tried something new. Did I take a chance with this book? *Fruit* felt like it was a chance. It was very scary to write that, and *Natural Order* was scary to write in a different way because I am not an older woman, I haven't lost a child, but sometimes that fear is what brings out your best writing. But, you have to be able to jump off that cliff and take a chance to say I don't know where I'm going with this, but let's take that leap and hope for the best.?

For more information on how you can take that leap into *Natural Order* and the year of community dialogue set to spring from it, visit www.onebookoneaurora.com.